
Culture, Classrooms, and Literacy Instruction: A Response to Moorman

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One day late last July, Bernie Hayes called. He wanted me to write something for the ARF Yearbook: a response to Gary Moorman's response to my 1989 ARF speech. I had read Gary's piece when he wrote it; in fact, I had heard about and read it as he wrote it, in various stages of becoming. Yet I listened to Bernie's voice on my answering machine with great dismay. I can't do that now, I thought, much as I'd like to. I'm five weeks into a new job and only two months away from another, still unwritten, speech that I absolutely have to start working on.

I stood there staring at the machine, fighting the familiar "no, I can't; yes, I can; no, I can't" battle academics know so well, when suddenly it dawned on me: the yet-to-be written speech was for a conference at Appalachian State, for Gary's conference; writing a response to Gary's paper would be both a perfectly logical pre-writing activity for that next speech and an equally logical "turn" in the conversation Gary, I, and others have been conducting—by mail, by phone, and in person—ever since ARF last winter. So I want to begin this response by thanking ARF for facilitating the kind of personal-cum-professional relationships to which Gary refers in his "Response to Fishman." On that point he couldn't be more right.

In fact, Gary is right on a number of points he makes in his response to my speech. It most certainly "was not [my] intention to praise or condemn Amish culture or schooling," so I was amazed and distressed last December by the people who so adamantly attacked the Amish for what they considered the narrow-minded stunting of children's growth by a hypocritical, parasitic society—people who seemed to think I was

praising what they perceived as an insidiously destructive, self-serving group no right-minded educator should tolerate.

First, let me clarify: while I do not agree with this particular assessment of the Amish, neither was my intent to present them as the opposite, as an ideal culture, without problems or contradictions, that outsiders should emulate in all things. I WAS presenting them as a model, however, when it comes to understanding the power of literacy for creating and maintaining a culture and the potential power of a coherent home/school/community relationship for effective transmission of that literacy. All we need do is look at the Amish to realize how continuity among their institutions and practices helps their children value and acquire literacy and to realize, conversely, why our children might not. That does not mean we have to adopt or adapt Amish institutions and practices; we don't even have to like them to learn from them.

So Gary was right: "the central point of [my] presentation was that there is a coherence among the Amish community, family life, and reading instruction in their schools," and the very fact of that coherence may be instructive for us.

Similarly, I see an object lesson for educators in the Amish experience, something we may want to avoid rather than emulate in any way at all. When the Amish make their children sit in silent classroom rows, when they instruct them to cover reams of dittoed worksheets with circles, lines, and single-word answers and to write reports on assigned topics using assigned formats, they are successfully creating the kind of passive, accepting, conforming people their culture needs to survive and grow. Keeping children in line—in lines, between lines, toeing lines—makes sense in Amish society. But no matter how long a tradition such practice has, it does not make sense in ours. In the homogeneous Amish world, social and cultural lines are clearly drawn; in pluralistic America they are not nearly so well marked. Our lines cross and they blur and there are significantly more of them, so our children need sociocultural road maps, not a single set of pre-determined directions.

If there was any praise implicit in my speech—and well there may have been—it was for a society that consciously acknowledges and works toward its own goals—a society that knows what it wants, that clearly articulates what it wants, and that works to accomplish what it wants—regardless of what others' goals may be. I respect the ability of the Amish to create, maintain, and transmit their culture so effectively. And I respect their right to have their own culture, even if it's one in which I would not choose to live. As Gary points out so well: "the American system of government guarantees the right of the Amish to

pursue their way of life, [and] our pluralistic culture demands that their values be respected."

Gary goes on to suggest that mainstream schools and teachers need "to develop a culture of literacy within each classroom . . . [one] so impelling, so attractive, and so exciting that all children will want to join in." he grounds that suggestion in the example of Amish children who acquire an orientation toward literacy in home and community settings and who bring that orientation to school with them, wanting to participate in the in-school environment which mirrors the outside so closely. But our children are not always so highly motivated, so school-ready. So in our classrooms, children need to find reasons to participate, reasons that may not already exist for them. Before we can help them do this, however, "it is critical that we understand the communities and families of the students [because] schools cannot replace students' cultural backgrounds; they can only build on them."

And that is the point to which I would most like to respond, for within that point are the seeds of our potential success and our potential failure when it comes to improving literacy education in this country. I will begin responding—as a good ethnographer must—with a story, or in this hypothetical case, with a scenario. I ask you to recall Eli, Jr., the 6-year-old baby of the Fisher family, who followed his siblings into Meadow Brook School the year I was there. Eli had spent his entire life surrounded by literacy. He had seen everyone in his family read and write, in many genres; he had his own magazine subscription, participated in family oral reading of the Bible, and wrote his own letters to distant relatives and friends. If ever a child demonstrated "reading readiness," Eli, Jr. certainly did, right down to his attitude: he couldn't wait to become "a scholar."

Now imagine Eli, Jr., going not to Meadow Brook School but to the public elementary school in your own neighborhood or district. Eli is not a gregarious child; few young Amish children are. Eli has learned that his role in life is to watch and to imitate, not to speak or initiate. So he enters a first grade classroom, sits quietly in his seat, and does his very best not to call attention to himself. He is fine on the playground; Amish children know how to run around, play tag, and join teams. But in the classroom, how would he fare at Sharing Time? Eli could never stand—or even sit—in front of the group to show and tell about anything personal. How would he be at answering teacher questions? Eli could never raise his hand to call attention to himself. Responding to story starters about talking pencils or fantasy planets? Eli would have nothing to write. In conferences with his teacher to find out "what's the matter?" Eli would have nothing to say, for to him "the matter" would be in the setting—its

norms and expectations—not in himself. But he could never articulate that. In his mind he would be “being good” and he wouldn’t know what was wrong. Yet how would he be perceived? He’s more than shy. Is he withdrawn? Troubled? Problematic? Less than bright? I hate to think about how Eli might be grouped in some mainstream schools and classrooms.

So when Gary calls for understanding and building on students’ cultural backgrounds, he is calling for exactly what ethnography does best: putting people in context and attempting to understand them in the frames or the webs (see Geertz, 1973) of their own making, not of someone else’s, no matter how well educated that someone else may be. As teachers and administrators we often think we know where children “are coming from”; current parlance even helps us oversimplify that term. We think that with our knowledge of developmental psychology and dysfunctional families we can correctly analyze the presenting behaviors of children in our schools. And in some cases we can—if only one or two variables make those children different from us or our cultural norms.

But when it comes to children significantly different from ourselves, children whose experience is significantly different from our own, we often move into a defensive, ethnocentric mindset that we believe is both necessary and helpful. If children are poor or foreign or members of most any minority, we assume that we know “where they are coming from”—and it’s rarely a good place. We assume that they come from homes, from neighborhoods, from cultures that somehow must be inferior, deficient in some way, making their lives and, by extension, their selves deficient in some way too. With that as a given, we then offer to take these children away from their mean streets and their meaningless lives, to help them enter a world of our making, infused with our meanings.

I don’t want to suggest that wanting to help children improve their socioeconomic condition is bad or cruel; of course it isn’t. What is bad, what is cruel, is seeing children, their families, their homes and their neighborhoods as deficient and attempting to make them see that too. Poor parents, non-English-speaking parents, single parents can and do love their children, and their children love them as well. Theirs are very complex, very sophisticated cultures and literacies, whether in barrios or ghettos, the Appalachians or the delta, among people wearing \$100 high-top sneakers or \$1.95 rubber sandals. And those cultures, those literacies, are not deficient; they are different, equally valuable ones, especially in the eyes of their children.

Which explains why telling Eli Fisher that his family, friends, and neighbors are wrong, telling him that self-disclosure, originality, and

competition are good, would not be the way to persuade him of anything. The sub-text of that message would be all too clear: we neither value nor respect his family or his community; therefore, we neither value nor respect him—unless he is willing to become one of us and abandon all of them.

That's a long way of explaining why Gary is so right: schools must build on the cultures children bring, not denigrate, disregard or attempt to dispose of them, for that is how we've disposed of so many children for so long.

I've now responded to one of Gary's points by taking it on a tangent clearly my own. I'd like to do the same with his not-so-modest proposal for reframing and restructuring high school education—something of no concern to the Amish but of considerable concern to me, as someone who has spent many years teaching high school English and who more recently teaches high school teachers. Gary's apprenticeship model has tremendous appeal. "Cognitive apprenticeship' ... embedded in authentic social and physical activity" does seem to take the direct instruction model and contextualize it in a whole-language/whole-life sort of way. And it has the potential to succeed for reasons even beyond that merging of approaches, reasons extending beyond those Gary cites but seemingly implicit in the chef's apprentice example he gives.

The first implicit source of success has to do with student-apprentices' relationship to what they are learning. A chef's apprentice—or a mason's apprentice, a student nurse, a law clerk—knows knowledge is useful for solving problems and cares about that fact for two reasons many of our high school students don't have. First, the problems those apprentices must solve are THEIR problems. People in most apprenticeship situations have chosen to be in them; they "own" their attendant problems, and they want to own their solutions. How many students in our secondary schools have that kind of vested interest in their work? How many see schoolwork as "real" work, as their work? That does not mean vocational or directly pre-professional education is the only valid variety, nor does it call for "relevance" in the '60s sense of that word. What it does call for is schoolwork "embedded in AUTHENTIC social and physical activity," that is, real reading, real writing, and real thinking that can be meaningful to students who are real people, not blank slates, empty vessels, or interchangeable parts in the machine that too often is school.

Which is directly related to the second reason student-apprentices have for caring about and succeeding in their work. Most learners in apprentice situations are treated like important, valuable people in the process of doing something important and valuable. How many stu-

dents in biology, algebra, or American literature classes are given that much respect or have that much motivation to be successful there? How many of our teenagers feel respected by schools that tell them what courses they may and may not take, what topics they may and may not read or write about, that even tell them when they may and may not leave the classroom to use the lavatory? If schools cannot conceive of students owning their own educations and their own lives, how can the students do that themselves? And without ownership and self respect, how can they be expected to care?

The second implicit source of success in Gary's model is the corollary of the first: it is the teacher's relationship to what she is teaching. In an apprenticeship situation, the teacher becomes not just master, but mentor, and her mastery is not over people but over her art or her science. Gary's master chef does not just stand in the kitchen and give orders to her apprentices; she models the skills she is teaching. Following from that example, teachers of writing must write; teachers of reading must read; teachers of history must explore history; teachers of science must explore science. That may mean struggling through drafts, doing research, or performing experiments "while [to quote Gary] articulating the cognitive processing that must accompany such behavior." It surely does not mean standing apart from students, lecturing, giving assignments, grading papers, and only asking questions to which they already know the answers.

I go back to Eli, Jr., this time not in first grade. Eli at 16 would need to feel just as valued, just as important as Eli at 6. He would need to know why he was being asked to do certain things and why he should do them in terms of his own life, not his teacher's. It would not be enough to say, "Eli, you need this knowledge to solve this problem: if he could not imagine owning the problem, just as it is not enough for more mainstream students if they cannot imagine owning their own education—and if their teachers can't conceive of student ownership or teacher mentorship either.